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RURAL DRIFT

City chicks who've swapped
their stilettos for gumboots

FANGIRL

The life and (sexy) times of
the *Conchords'* Kristen Schaal

Vive la révolution!

French fashion finally
breaks the mould

Peanuts

Why the world fell in
love with Charlie Brown



Katie Flett is one of many young women who have chosen to leave the big smoke for a quieter life in the country. Now, when the former Christchurch resident visits the city, she can't wait to leave



Sarah Murray meets some townies who've gone country and asks, is the grass really greener on the other side?

see ya, city

As Tania Lawrence drove from Auckland to Marlborough she felt an increasing sense of panic. The ferry ride across Cook Strait provided momentary relief – perhaps the South Island really *was* peace on Earth – but a few hours later, as she drove down the long gravel driveway to her new home, she thought, “What the f*** have I done?”

At 28, Lawrence had quite suddenly packed up her Ponsonby, Auckland existence and given away her work suits to embark on a quieter life, running a lodge in a 400-hectare valley halfway between Nelson and Blenheim. The lodge, in Rai Valley, had no cellphone coverage. Lawrence was in a state of shock. “All I could think was, ‘So this is what the world’s going to be now,’” she recalls.

Before that, Lawrence had run a call centre. “I worked in downtown Queen Street and lived at the bars on the weekends. I had a corporate credit card so I’d be out three or four nights a week drinking till three in the morning and going in to work the next day. I loved the Ponsonby lifestyle and it was great fun, but I didn’t know how I was ever going to grow out of it.”

Although she may have felt like it, Lawrence isn’t the only city girl who’s gone country. All over New Zealand people are moving from our biggest cities to small rural towns like Leeston, Oxford and Culverden, places so remote I have to keep clicking Google Maps’ ‘zoom out’ button to work out where they are.

Significant numbers of Kiwis are making the move – the latest census figures show that between 2001 and 2006, 5112 people moved from main urban areas to rural ones. Sure, some of those are greying empty-nesters chasing a slab of land and a bit of peace and quiet, but a surprising chunk – more than a quarter – are aged between 25 and 39. They’re young and successful bankers, nurses, retail assistants and IT specialists. The women among them, probably more so than the men, have professional and social lives often inextricably tied to urban living – espresso coffee, fashion boutiques, hair salons – yet for one reason or another they’ve opted to swap their high heels for gumboots and embark on a life-changing experience.

Most New Zealanders will be familiar with the term ‘urban drift’ – a trend >>

PHOTOGRAPH: JANE USSHER

that started after World War II and saw people propelled out of small and remote areas by a lack of work and a desire to see what opportunities city life could offer them. These days many people are doing the opposite – leaving the cities, fed up with the daily grind of inflexible work environments and the alienation they feel from fellow townies. They seek a more real, more peaceful, less materialistic existence.



Tania Lawrence swapped her Ponsonby lifestyle for pig hunting

Lawrence made her big move on a bit of a whim. She moved to the valley with her then boyfriend, who had a yearning to escape Auckland's "rat race", but the couple later split. It took her about a year to adjust to her new life. Initially, having been used to managing teams of up to 100 people, she felt secluded and unimportant. She continued to check her emails about 20 times a day. She found that everything she cared about was now less accessible, and everyone was further away. "My nearest latte was an hour away. But I did bring my coffee machine with me," she says.

In an attempt to rally, she joined the local library and Rural Women NZ (an organisation that supports women with an interest in rural issues) and involved herself in most activities in her new township. She even tried pig hunting, which has subsequently become something of a hobby, although she's yet to get used to the blood and gore.

It took the locals a while to adjust to Lawrence, too. For a time they nicknamed her "Lolly". "It took me ages to figure out what they meant," she recalls, laughing. "One day I was like, 'What do you mean?' and they said, 'Well you're a JAFA – but you're all right.'

"They'd find it funny because all the stuff that was just their day-to-day life, like when the farmers were calving, I'd find absolutely fascinating. I think it just

"The wider community is great. There are fundraising things and duck shooting – that's quite a big thing out here. It's not like we live a totally reclusive life"

took a while for some people to figure out where I was coming from."

Eight years on, and pregnant with her first child to her new partner, Lawrence has settled into running Mudbrick Lodge, playing host to guests, a few cows and some goats. She loves the fact that her children will be brought up here, but worries that there are limited opportunities for them. "It's a bit of a catch-22: I'd like them to grow up in the country but then be able to go to the big city and have career and travel options... then maybe come back if they want to."

For 32-year-old Sarah Tatham, the biggest shock was the isolation. Having grown up in Wellington and worked as a nurse in Masterton and Melbourne, she moved six years ago to her husband's family's 1485-hectare sheep and beef farm at Homewood. The property, which is 20 minutes from Masterton, borders the east coast and boasts its own five kilometres of coast.

"It sounds idyllic," she says, having just come in from feeding the ponies with her two young children, "but it isn't always. There aren't a lot of young families around us – we're the youngest and daycare is a 50-minute drive away. My kids go once a week, but it means I'm never at home without them."

Tatham readily moved to Homewood – on one condition: she had to be able to get *The Dominion Post* delivered daily. "It sounds silly, but for me it was one of the biggest things. I needed to have that connection to the outside world."

She battled her feelings of isolation by making the five-hour round trip back to Wellington every couple of months, where she'd catch up with girlfriends. But she's also made some new friends closer to home.

"I've made really good friends at the local playgroup. Maybe even friends you wouldn't be friends with if you were in town because, you know, you just tend to stick with your own. The wider community is great too. It provides us with a lot of social events. There are fundraising things and duck shooting – that's quite a big thing out here. There's always something happening; it's not like we live a totally reclusive life."

Driving through the Waikato, an hour south of Te Awamutu, I begin to understand the seclusion of rural New Zealand. Cars slide away until I'm alone on the road, and all I see are green fields, fences and cows. Lots of cows. I pray the Navman doesn't let me down because there's no one around to ask for directions. At 10am, when I arrive at my destination – a 325-hectare farm in Arohena – 30-year-old sharemilker Katie Flett is performing the morning calf-feeding routine.

Originally from Christchurch, Flett looks every inch a country girl in khaki track pants, a black jumper and Red Band gumboots. Her hands are all cut up – the result of a run-in with a blackberry bush and a rogue calf – and her clothes >>



PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

Wellingtonian Sarah Tatham has found a sense of community in the Wairarapa



Former chef Rebecca Thompson's day kicks off with milking at 4.30am

are soon splattered with mud and milk as she drives around on the quad bike with dogs Ozzy and King running beside her.

The calves are mooing hungrily. Flett lugs buckets full of milk from a barrel to a feeding device with multiple teats for the calves to suckle on. She's enthusiastic about farm life but it's not long before the conversation moves to fashion. She rattles off a list of labels she's fond of before conceding her shopping trips have become less frequent lately. "It doesn't mean I've lost my love of fashion though," she says. "I just don't have anywhere to wear it."

She shows me a pair of silver and black stilettos she fell in love with two months ago, adding that she's only worn them twice so far. She still likes to put time and thought into her appearance but she says these days it's more important to her that she's seen as another hard-working farmer. "I'm a girl and I love dressing up. But here... you just want to fit in."

Flett once contemplated being a makeup artist, but her love of horses, the outdoors and her man won out. Initially the couple moved to Te Puke in the Bay of Plenty, where she seemed to have the best of both worlds: working in a clothing store in Mount Maunganui during the week, and relief milking on the weekend. "It was the best life. I'd go to work, get dolled up, come home, put my gummies on, and go out on the farm," she says.

For a while, the couple moved from farm to farm. Flett, fresh out of retail and with two young girls, missed her connection with fashion and the social side of the industry, so she began taking rural women shopping to help them find their style. At one stage she even contemplated turning her new-found hobby into a business. "I love making women feel attractive. Just because you're in farming doesn't mean you have to look like a bush pig," she says.

"I'd never have been able to have a family if I'd stayed in Auckland. Before, work dictated everything, and I had to work my whole life around that. Now I work around my life"

Now with three girls under five, the youngest just three months old, Flett's efforts at style have been suspended. Although she likes shopping malls, she hates traffic, and feels that city folk are in their own world most of the time. "When you're here and you go into town, you give people a smile and wave. You can't do that in the city. There are just people everywhere. There are so many people it's scary.

"I'm not being mean about city people but they're a bit narrow-minded. After a weekend there, I can't wait to get out."

In Ohaeawai – zoom out – the Bay of Islands, an hour north of Whangarei, 28-year-old Rebecca Thompson's day begins with milking at 4.30am. Gone are the days when she would make sure her hair and makeup were perfect before she left the house. Now, as a dairy farmer, she ties her hair in a ponytail, pulls on some trackies and puts on a cap. She's been following the same routine since she left her job as a chef in Auckland almost three years ago.

"It's a bit of groundhog day... everyday's the same," she says. "But I'm definitely happier being here. I'm much more in control of my life than I was before. I think I've grown up a lot since I've come up here. People tell me I look a bit more mumsy but I think I'm just more relaxed in my whole appearance. You have to be in this type of environment – I can't be tottering around in high heels with my makeup done. It's just not practical."

After returning from her OE in London, Thompson found a job working nights at a central Auckland tapas bar. It provided her with a good platform to meet people, but ultimately the work just wasn't stimulating enough for her. She was bored and looking for a new challenge.

"I was sick of working my bum off for somebody who was never going to give me anything in return," she says. "I'd had enough of working as a chef so, yeah, the opportunity arose and I came up here."

Now mother to a 14-month-old boy, Thompson's content to stay home during the weekend, although she admits it wasn't always like that. "The first two years that I lived up here, we used to go to Auckland every weekend we had off. It was just lonely here and I didn't know if I'd ever fit in. But then, I dunno, you learn to be a bit more reliant on yourself and happy to be at home."

Most of Thompson's immediate family has since relocated to the Bay of Islands, so she has a lot of support around her, and can take her son to work with her every day. She knows she wouldn't have had that sort of flexibility at her old workplace.

"I'd never have been able to have a family if I'd stayed living in Auckland – especially with the job I had. I'd never have gotten to see Ollie as he'd always be in daycare," she says. "Before, when I lived in the city, work dictated everything, and I had to work my whole life around that. Now I work around my life."

Thompson will always miss aspects of the city but for now she's content with her new lifestyle, which suggests that not only can you take the girl out of the city, perhaps you can also take a bit of the city out of the girl. "When I go into town I just go in my gumboots," says Thompson. "And if you have a little bit of cow poo on your pants? Well, no one really cares." ■